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ABSTRACT

An attempt is made, in this paper, to develop a model that would apply ethnographic research techniques to public school research and systems. The model presented consists of three developmental phases. In the first phase two basic approaches to field design, either of which can be used are described: the emergent categories approach, in which the anthropologist is interested in the operation of the school; and the behavior of students, teachers, and staff, or the pre-determined categories approach, in which the anthropologist has identified an issue or a problem for study prior to the initial stages of field research. Phase two of the model consists of a description of the problems of selecting a school for research, as well as the techniques for gaining entry permission in order to carry out ethnographic research and the processes that affect working relations with public school authorities and personnel. In phase three, anthropological issues and methods are presented, expecially participation-observation techniques. In the final section of the paper, a list of possible subjects and topics of interest to anthropologists for research purposes is presented. (Author/JR)

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC MODEL FOR RESEARCHING THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no other social institution has been more intensely studied by social scientists than the public school systems in the United States. Banks of information have been compiled especially by educators, psychologists, and sociologists. They have, it seems, examined every possible facet of school life; however, they are continuing to expend even more time and energy on educational research. Though all this research has been completed there is at present a need for new points of view and new approaches to educational research. Anthropological field research techniques, specifically ethnographic research, may fulfill this need for a new look at educational problems.

Traditionally, anthropologists have studied the cultures of non-western peoples. Since anthropology is a relatively new social science, anthropologists have been actively concerned with adopting and developing social research techniques that are effective and efficient in uncovering social cause and effect relationships. If ethnographic field research techniques are effective research tools when applied to "foreign" cultures, might they not be effective when applied

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to our modern social institutions? An attempt is made in this paper, to develop a model that would apply ethnographic research techniques to public school research.

The recommended research model consists of three developmental phases. In the first phase two basic approaches to field design are described. Phase two consists of a description of the problems of selecting a school for research, as well as the techniques for gaining entry permission in order to carry out ethnographic research. In phase three, anthropological issues and methods, especially participation-observation techniques, are presented. The schematic flow chart on page 3 was prepared to provide the reader with a holistic structure of the research model. The chart is followed by several sections in which the major subdivisions of the model are described. In the final section of the paper the reader is provided with a list of subjects and topics which may be of interest to anthropologists for research purposes.

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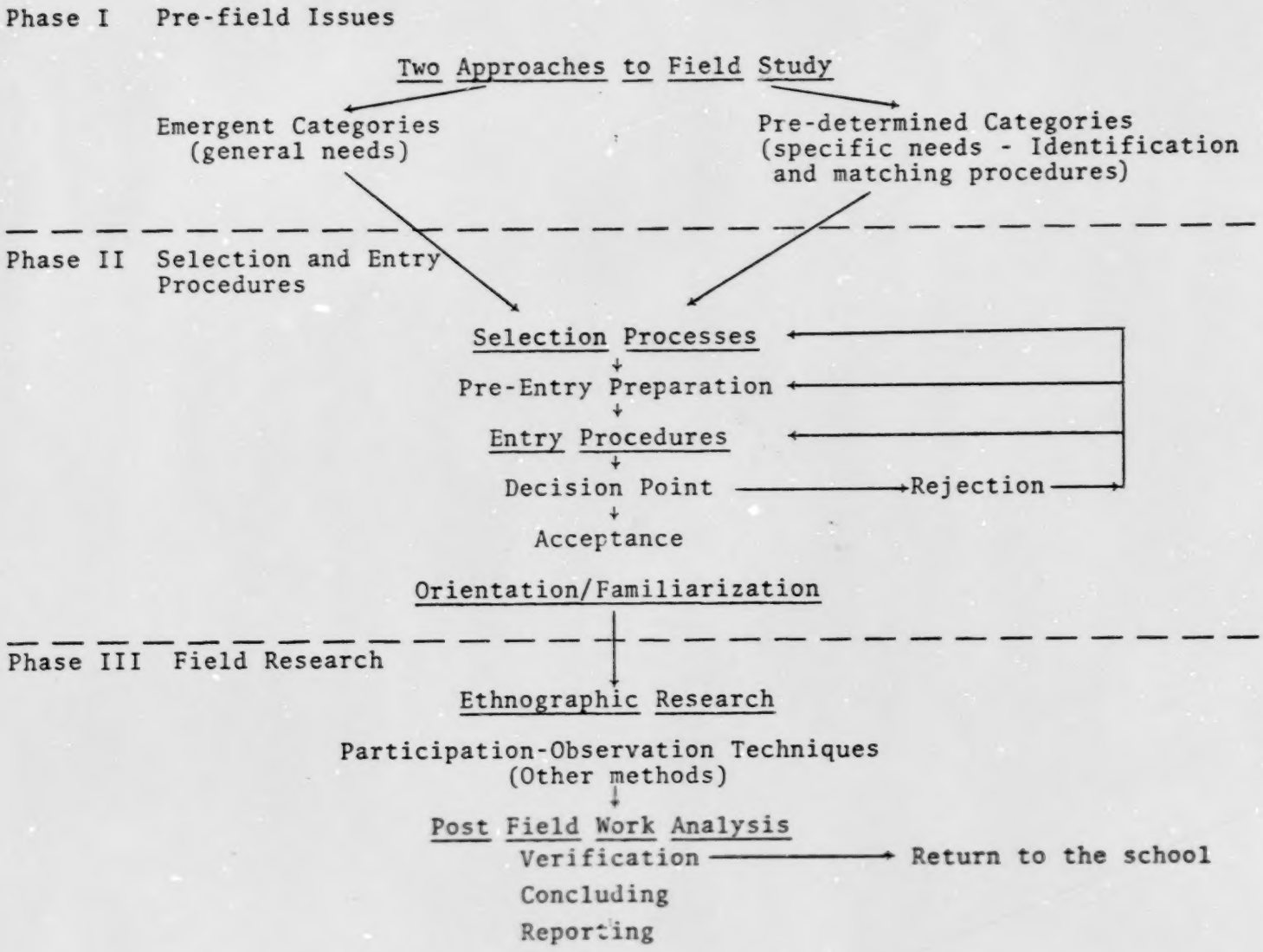
Dynneson-Bastien Model for School Ethnography



Phase I: Pre-Field Issues

Two Approaches to Field Study

This paper is based upon the assumption that anthropologists interested in school ethnography will choose overt rather than surreptitious means for gathering data and observing behavior in the public school. The issues pertaining to the actual field research design and recommended methods and techniques will be described in phase III of the model. Phases I and II contain issues and recommendations regarding decisions and processes that affect working relations with public school authorities and personnel. Once the actual field design has been developed, the anthropologist has two basic approaches which will influence his relations with school authorities. The design of the study dictates that the anthropologist will either develop an Emergent Categories Approach or a Pre-determined Categories Approach. Either approach characterizes and influences working relationships, selection procedures, and entry procedures.

The Emergent Categories Approach

In the Emergent Categories Approach, the anthropologist is interested in the operation of the

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school and the behavior of students, teachers, administration, or staff. Once the anthropologist has become familiar with the operation of the school, he/she will begin to focus on a specific issue that has surfaced while baseline behaviors were being observed. The only criteria guiding the initial phases of this approach are general, therefore, the researcher has an unlimited number of schools to select from for study. For instance, a researcher may want to study the behavior, duties, and influence of a principal in relation to student behavior. Selection is not critical at this point because public schools almost universally have principals as chief building administrators; therefore, the Emergence Categories Approach is automatic. On the other hand, a researcher may need to observe the behavior of just female principals, the added criteria makes selection much more critical and the Emergent Categories Approach will not be used. Therefore, Research Design, in this case, influenced the research approach and the research approach influenced the working relationships with the school. Emergent Categories influence working relationships in the following two ways:

1. In the selection and entry procedures the research prospectus includes a request for gathering

baseline behavior, followed by the need for specific observations and data gathering. In other words the researcher cannot describe the specific subject of his study until the subject emerges from initial observations.

2. The selection of a school for research is not critical because the research does not have a specific topic or subject in mind. Therefore, the researcher can choose from among the existing schools that are convenient and open to this type of approach. The danger is in being rejected because the school authorities are not satisfied with the formal or informal proposal that they receive. They most often prefer the researcher to have a specific subject and research goal in mind prior to their approval. Because of this, there is an assumed rate of higher rejections with the Emergent Categories Approach.

The Pre-determined Categories Approach

In the Pre-determined Categories Approach the anthropologist has identified an issue or a problem for study prior to the initial stages of field research. The research design of the study dictates the specific

categories -- person(s), groups, grade level, program, and educational setting -- to be researched thus eliminating the need for thorough observations prior to the actual observation of the research subject. The criteria guiding the field observations and data gathering process are carefully and concisely spelled out in the design of the research project (perhaps in perspectus form). Therefore, the Pre-determined Categories Approach is automatically determined in the research proposal. For example, if the researcher has determined that information is needed on lower middle-class black students, between the ages of 12 and 14 (junior high level), with average IQ scores, the categories have already been established and the selection of schools containing this group may be quite limited. Therefore, the obstacles and problems facing the researcher in this case are quite different from those facing the researcher using the Emergent Categories Approach. Of course, the most serious obstacle for the researcher is obtaining permission to carry out research within the available schools that meet the needs of the research design, a problem not uncommon to anthropologists working in other situations.

The Pre-determined Categories Approach differs from the Emergent Approach in the following two ways:

1. In the Pre-determined Categories Approach the researcher has specifically identified the subject of the study and the nature of the problem involved in the research. Therefore, the researcher is able to provide the school district with a specific proposal that identifies and limits research interests. This may be more appealing to those responsible for making the decision to accept or reject the research project.

2. Rejection of the research project under the Pre-determined Categories Approach is very serious, because in many instances the researcher is limited to schools that meet the requirements of the specific research design. If no other schools are available, long distances may have to be travelled so that the project will not have to be abandoned.

Phase II: Selection and Entry Procedures

Selecting a School for Ethnographic Research

A typical public school contains students, teachers, administrators and people in various supportive roles. The differences between schools are caused by the characteristics within the student population, the training and background of the teaching staff, the attitude and proficiencies of the administration, the organization and design of the physical plant, and the programs, activities and materials that are used in the teaching-learning process. These similarities and differences affect both selection and entry procedures and must be taken into account by the researcher. In statistical research a random selection of subjects is considered appropriate; however, when an anthropologist is attempting to select a school district or a single school for research, the selection will be affected by the researcher's needs. In the Emergent Categories Approach some form of randomized selection may be possible because the specific subject and topic of interest will emerge after the initial observation and familiarization period has passed. However, when Pre-determined Categories have

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been established, the process of matching schools with research needs becomes more important. The researcher will be required to survey and identify those schools that have the student population, school design, or programs that will satisfy the needs of the researcher.

Selection then is found within the areas of differences between schools. In addition to the general categories mentioned above, it may be helpful to the reader to list some more general differences here. They would include:

1. Political attitudes and values.
2. Religious belief, membership, and practice.
3. Racial make-up of the community.
4. Population density of the community.
5. Occupational characteristics of the community.
6. Per capita income within the community.
7. The number of children per household.
8. Property values within the community.
9. The size of the school district.
10. The number of pupils per school.
11. Group averages on student achievement and I.Q. scores.
12. Historic influences that have influenced the development of school policy.
13. Special programs that are unique to the school district.

Besides these items there are other items that separate one school or school district from another. For instance,

the amount of money spent on each child's education, extra-curricular activities, the location of the school in terms of other educational activities (e.g. museums), the number of specialists that support the teaching staff, formal and informal organizations within the school, joint school and community projects, vocational training programs, and programs that aid students with various personal problems.

The researcher using the Emergent Categories Approach is not as concerned with these differences, as is the researcher using the Pre-determined Categories Approach. While the opportunities to identify an interesting subject or topic may vary because of these differences, the Emergent Categories Approach is not concerned with these specifics in the selection process. The specifics are absolutely critical, however, to the researcher who has identified the subject and topic prior to entry into the schools. Therefore, the Pre-determined Categories Approach requires that prior knowledge of the schools be acquired before entering the field. The type of information needed may be secured from state and regional educational agencies (e.g. the State Department of Education).

Entry Procedures

While research projects are welcome in most school districts, a high percentage of the requests to conduct research are rejected. School systems have developed some relatively sophisticated techniques for evaluating research proposals. Some school districts assign this task to a specific administrator, while others have used a committee system made up of teachers, administrators, and even parents. Because of these practices, the researcher needs to consider school district policies that regulate research within the school district. As an entry procedure it is suggested that the researcher:

1. Write an initial introductory letter to the district superintendent. As part of this letter you should include an overview of your research project written in layman's language. In addition, request information on school policy governing research projects, and request the name of the person that should be contacted within the school district regarding the processing of your proposal.

2. Follow the school district's procedures, being especially careful to avoid confusion by getting clarification when you need help. Most school districts will

request a formal proposal of your intent. Write a clear concise proposal that can be easily read and interpreted just for this purpose. The actual research prospectus or research design may be too sophisticated for others outside your area of expertise.

3. Attempt to set up an interview appointment to discuss the proposal once it has been submitted. During the interview session, issues that concern both parties can be cleared up. This may be a bargaining session in which the researcher modifies some issues that are considered troublesome by the school administrators. Also during this session, school administrators may concede to the special needs or requests of the researcher. Often a good bargainer can gain concessions in this manner; it is especially important if the researcher wants to do some type of participation-observation (see Phase III).

4. If the proposal is rejected, the project may have to be abandoned. However, in most cases the researcher can either select another school district or reapproach the same school district with a modified proposal. (See page 3)

Some Common Reasons For Rejection

If rejection occurs, the researcher is faced with the problem of either abandoning the research project, modifying the research proposal, or finding a substitute school district that would meet the requirements of the research design. In some cases reasons for rejection are given, while in some other cases specific reasons are withheld. Usually debate over rejection is not helpful. However, without a specific reason for rejection, there is no hope for modification. Listed below are some of the most common reasons for rejection:

1. Administrative attitude -- a personal dislike for the project.
2. Poor research design -- unclear objectives, lack of relativity and importance to educators.
3. Excessive demands placed on school personnel -- the project required teacher or administrative time outside of their normal work load.
4. Failure to provide adequate guarantees -- the researcher was not able to give satisfactory assurances that the result of the research would not cause hardship or embarrassment within the school district.
5. Topic sensitivity -- the research topic was considered inappropriate because of controversial nature of issues involved in the research.
6. Technical aspects -- the procedures designed for gathering information were considered disruptive or inappropriate by school officials.

7. Institutional relationships -- the attitude of school officials toward the associated research institution or prior agreements with other institutions.

8. Reporting the research -- fear of the publicized results of the study.

9. Lack of teacher interest -- failure to gain teacher support for the research project.

10. Failure to reach initial agreement -- inability to solve initial problems pertaining to execution of the research.

11. Personal attributes of the researcher -- the appearance or personality of the researcher may cause rejection.

12. Pre-existing notions regarding anthropologists -- educators or parents may regard anthropological activities or research inappropriate for the public schools.

In general, the researcher is in a weak position when requesting permission to enter the public schools, unless the request for research comes from school officials. In other words you need them more than they need you. In spite of the barriers, ethnographic research is becoming an accepted approach for re-examining educational institutions.

Post Entry Familiarization and Orientation Process

Once selection and entry procedures have been successfully completed the researcher will need to spend an initial period of time learning about the operation and organization of the school. The following is a partial

list of topics and areas of initial research that should aid the researcher in becoming familiar with the policies, procedures and operations of a school or a school district. The researcher using the Emergent Categories Approach will need to make a relatively thorough survey of all items listed below, while the researcher using the Pre-determined Categories Approach will most likely review only those items that specifically pertain to the subject or topic of his research.

1. A study of the administrative chain of command.
2. Official school policies, rules and regulations.
3. Time schedules which regulate the movement and activities of students and teachers.
4. Lists and charters of officially constituted clubs, social and professional organizations.
5. Official curriculum guides for each discipline area -- e.g. social studies, science, english and art.
6. Lists and descriptions of special programs, both academic and vocational. Special education and related programs would be included.
7. The design of the building and grounds and its influence on school programs.
8. The use of special areas such as the library, teachers lounge, and facilities provided for non-classroom activities.

Phase III: Field Research

Anthropological Fieldwork

Anthropological fieldwork involves a long stay among the members of the society being studied in order for the ethnographer to get a more complete view of that society (Crane 74). By being there, in the sociocultural situation (Erickson 72:10), the researcher directly observes and experiences behavior within the different contexts of social interraction and cultural patterning. "It is impossible," Evans-Pritchard (62:80) writes, "to understand clearly and comprehensively any part of a people's social life except in the full context of their social life as a whole." The researcher then compares his "field" with other sociocultural situations throughout the world (Evans-Fritchard 62; Levi-Strauss 63; Kroeber 63).

Anthropology does not limit its research to nations, linguistic groups, regions, or villages but to any situation where social networks and symbolic patterns are operant. A particular class, school, or school district provides situations for ethnographic fieldwork, which can result in observation and description of not only the parts of this system, but also their contextual

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significance within the holistic framework, which can be compared to other contexts.

Ethnographic Models For Fieldwork

Ethnologies present theories by which anthropologists explain their fieldwork data. These models, traditionally employed for understanding another culture, can be adapted to the school system. Malinowski (1922) viewed the Trobriand Islanders, for example, as a biological-functional society divisible for analytic purposes into categories of activity which fulfilled the most basic human needs. With some interpretation, Malinoski's categories apply to the classroom as Erikson writes (72:11-14):

> In Malinowski's model social behavior is viewed as exchange. "Exchange" here includes the exchange of valued goods through barter, exchange of symbols of value in a money market, or the exchange of behaviors in some form of parity.
>
> The classroom can be seen as an economic system of behavior -- a political economy-- in which students offer deference to the teacher in exchange for kind treatment and the purveying of knowledge.

Malinowski's categories came from research on an island, isolated and free from external influences. Schools are subsystems of systems, whose very complexity pervades the flexibility of Malinowski's ideas. Erikson

deals with this complexity by suggesting additional research into the relationship of the school to its surrounding sociocultural environment. (Pelto 1970, Naroll and Cohen 1973, and Erickson 72:17-18, provide samples of questions.)

Society has been compared to a biological organism (see Radcliffe-Brown 52), composed of different parts, which are functionally interrelated. Goffman's The Boys in White, for example, studied medical students according to role (position in social network) and status (rights and obligations). The researcher would study the roles within the school system and how these roles function together. He could also observe the congruence or discrepancy between the ideal behavior expected of the roles and the actual behavior of those filling them.

Another possibility might be to consider the values and symbols according to their classificatory and symbolic structure. Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger shows that the housewife dusting her furniture is a behavior intelligible within a classificatory system separating the sacred from the profane. What classification system is consciously or unconsciously employed in the classroom? What symbols are important and into what patterns do they fit? (See Turner 67 and Bastien 73).

Symbolic patterns and classificatory systems consider underlying structures, which may not be consciously perceived by the informants. Moreover, the relationship of the underlying symbolic structure is interrelated to observable behavior and environment (see Levi-Strauss 74:178-246).

An easier level of analysis for training research students might be to have them discover the characteristic ways different people categorize, code, and define their own experience. Spradley (75) and McCurdy (72) provide examples of how students were trained to do ethnographies of ordinary settings, such as fire stations, bars, and classrooms. Their informants' organization of the world became the basis for organizing their papers. How one teacher, for example, categorizes her students and defines tasks for them could be compared to the categorizations of other teachers (Goetz and Hansen 74).

Each ethnology presents a level of analysis, which may or may not suit the field fieldwork situation of either the Emergent or Pre-determined Category Approaches. In most instances, theory follows fieldwork, and only after intensive participant observation will a model emerge which explains most of the data (see Lutz 74).

Participant Observation

Ethnographic research usually employs participant observation, which is the assimilation of the researcher into a sociocultural environment, participating as a "member." Anthropologists live, eat, and work with the people for a long time to collect firsthand data, which can best be made intelligible within its own setting. Participant observation brings to educational research an experiential and holistic viewpoint for understanding its sociocultural factors. This methodology assumes that the researcher is able to understand the situation to the degree he participates in it. Firth, studying the Tikopians, wrote that it is to the degree that the natives socially digest the anthropologist, that his research will be successful. Being digestible to another sociocultural environment, such as the classroom, depends upon the researcher's flexibility to role play as an unobtrusive member.

The classroom is no exception to the generalization that groups suspect strangers and do not like to be observed. A few suggestions are: avoid questioning and wait for the group to express itself, at its own rate, which it will once you have gained its confidence. Starting slowly and gaining confidence are necessary for

establishing a role within any group, and this role will always be somewhat as an outsider and not as a peer member. The researcher defines his own role, and in part it is defined for him by the situation. No amount of training can predict his precise behavior, but he can anticipate the nature of the game and the playing field beforehand by familiarizing himself with the educational institution as outlined in Phase I. Because of the frequent need to improvise, the prudent anthropologist strives to retain independence of decision and "play things by ear" in favor of what is feasible in the field (see Paul 1953).

Beware of lessening your role as participant by establishing yourself as a possible informer for political manuveurs. The indirect approach to informants is recommended. This methodology studies the symbolic meaning of behavior, the tacit premises, and unconscious structures rather than explanations, answers, and the directly observable, which is often a smoke-screen. Informal settings, such as playgrounds and clubrooms, are often reversed structures or patterns to those of the formal setting. Where and with whom people sit and play might reverse the social structure. Peoples and groups express themselves by the tone of their voices,

expressions on their faces, and content of their words. Behavior is equally symbolized through bodily positions, interaction, and dress.

Be sensitive, sympathetic, and intelligent in your relationships. Truthfulness and sincerity are the basis of most lasting mutual understanding. If after several years, you have learned to become a participant within another sociocultural environment, then you will have accomplished a great deal, even though this is all you have to show for your research.

The researcher is less a participant to the degree that "he only sees what he wants to see." The anthropologist who compares everything he sees in the Andes to what he saw in the United States is being ethnocentric, just as the school researcher who is always trying to fit his fieldwork data into his preconceived categories. The classroom ethnographer needs in-process training to escape the bias of preformed patterns and to inductively collect data which has an inherent pattern. Everyday he must remind himself to interpret classroom behavior in terms of this particular classroom's pattern.

Data Collecting

Observation of a new sociocultural environment is easy at first, as new smells, sounds, and sights

whirl around the senses. Anything and everything is important in the beginning, because it is only after collecting much data that the researcher will see how the parts make up the whole. He is encouraged to write legible notes on notecards. The top line describes the category, such as "Characteristic Dress", and in the right corner are noted the date, place, and person (group). At home the researcher will daily review these notes, filing them according to significant categories. The categories can be emergent or arrived at through preliminary research; for example, if the research is concerned with symbolic patterns, then one would look for symbolism in beliefs, dress, behavior, and social relations. Organized and legible notes are necessary for the sanity of the researcher, who will otherwise be overwhelmed by tons of information on scraps of paper, containing some bit of information he can never find.

Tape recorders should be used with permission of both the school authorities and the group. Tape recorders are discouraged in the classroom because they inhibit spontaneity. Moreover, information on tapes must be transcribed to note cards for analysis and synthesis, which can be a very tedious job.

The researcher gradually builds up a body of observational data and interpretative comments, which when submitted to analysis begin to exhibit certain regularities from which it is possible to elicit a structure, expressed in a set of patterns. The interpretation can come from the students and teacher in the classroom, the administrators, and the researcher. Sometimes, for example, playground activity is the mirrored reverse of the classroom. One can only understand playground activity in light of the classroom. Observing the pattern in different environments may be one check for validity.

A pattern is more than a list of parts. To describe the parts that compose a pattern is not sufficient to describe that pattern; the relations between the parts must also be described. In the classroom, for example, the researcher might discover some relationship between posture and learning, or spatial organization and grouping, or symbolic ordering and behavior. From future research, relevant categories will emerge within the classroom, which will express patterns. These patterns will then be hypotheses for future research, which will eventually lead to theory building.

The researcher then begins to interpret his field data in terms of the regularities and patterns which are operant. The best ethnographies are those which can make intelligible most of the data within its contextual whole.

Verification requires documentation and describing accurately observed data which is shown to be typical and significant in the culture and society. The data is then specifically explained within the total system. The researcher may return to recheck some specific item. The researcher finally compares his ethnography with similar and different situations throughout the world.

Basic to education and anthropology is an exchange of meaning between people. Participant observation endeavors to receive knowledge by sharing with others as a member of their group, and reciprocity requires that the researcher also share his analysis with them.

CONCLUSION

School ethnography can lead to an understanding of the social interactions and social forces that influence the behavior and development of children in American society. In addition, school ethnography may be able to play an important role in the revitalization of the American school system. While the anthropological approach may be initially rejected or resisted by school authorities who are fearful or dislike "outside" observers, in time acceptable working relationships between anthropologists and educators will be established.

Some practical procedures, guidelines, and techniques were proposed in this paper in an attempt to identify some of the typical problems that exist in educational research. Although every research situation contains unique requirements, there are also common issues and problems that can be avoided by an awareness of procedures that are acceptable in most situations.

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